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AUTHOR Mitchell, Judith Ann
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ABSTRACT

The routinization and ritualization of school reflects, in part, an emphasis on acquisition of knowledge and technical mastery of skills rather than understanding and the ability to apply information to new situations. A societal environment needs to be created that promotes learning as more than an aggregation of facts and answers to test questions. Researchers should examine more carefully understanding, values, and attitudes acquired through schooling, rather than the effectiveness of one method over another in terms of achievement. Administrators should place more emphasis on learning environments in schools and less on the bureaucratic structures used to systematize them. Schools of education must prepare teachers who are open-minded, knowledgeable, and skillful in creating a participatory learning experience for students. A carefully designed teacher education curriculum which balances subject-matter knowledge with professional education is needed. Teacher preparation students must become aware of the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, and how times, events, inventions, people, and ideas interact to form the human experience. (JD)

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A Learning Society

Judith Ann Mitchell
Kennesaw College

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In the past year, a variety of commissions and task forces have examined schools and schooling in the United States. The most publicized of these reports was that of The National Commission on Excellence in Education-A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform. This simply written report noted that "...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (pg. 5). It goes on to state that "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (pg. 5). This opening barrage sets the tone for much of what follows. The commission cites several "indicators of the risk" and several "findings". From these emerge five recommendations. The most heralded of these focus on increasing the requirements for high school graduation - the "five new basics", more rigorous standards and higher expectations for academic performance, and increasing the amount of time spent in school.

Unfortunately, the simple nature of this report has engendered simplistic solutions to complex problems. Rather than examining and discussing how subject matter is or should be taught, the commission makes broad suggestions on what should be taught. Rather than examining how time is being spent, it suggests more time be spent. More courses, more time and more standards are not necessarily better. This is not to suggest these areas should not be examined. Indeed they should be. However, what the commission has chosen to examine really doesn't get at the problem of what is happening in the classrooms. This is a grave oversight, for it is in the classroom that students at all levels give meaning and value to their educational experience and to learning.

While the report does not address the issue of learning in our society in its recommendations, it does point out the need to create a learning society: a society committed to:

> ...a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members an opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life (pgs. 13-14).

Unfortunately, as Greenfield (1983) points out, the commission's suggestion "that the value of education is not contigent on any material or private 'payoff'" has been much ignored. She goes on to argue that education "is not about getting ahead, it is about discovering the joy of learning itself." This very important perspective is not reflected in the commission's recommendations. It is a perspective that may well be the key to developing a learning society. It may as Ravitch (1984) notes explain the "rising tide of mediocrity".

> The children... arrive in junior high schools and secondary schools knowing <u>how</u>, but not <u>why</u> or <u>what</u>. They have been miseducated; they have been taught to read without learning to love reading; they have been taught social studies as a package of skills rather than as a window on the varieties of human experience. Such educationally baneful practices are part and parcel of the "rising tide of mediocrity, and it is unfortunate that they have been ignored by the national commission (p. 24).

By not addressing the role of education in developing a learning society and the joy of learning, the national commission may have further obscurred the problem with education in this country rather than clarifying it or developing appropriate solutions.

The concern for developing a learning society, a society that encourages a joy of learning is not unique to this generation. Eighty years ago, Dewey raised many of the same issues and questions. In many ways our society parallels that of Dewey's. It is a time of rapid change. Scientific and technological developments far outpace our ability to understand and make provision for them. Knowledge and skills mastered today may be obsolete five years from now. Students entering school today will be entering the work force in the twenty-first century. Consequently, the mastery of known skills and knowledge will neither prepare our

students for the work place nor will it provide the student with the understanding and ability to solve the problems such change creates. Because Dewey deals with similar societal concerns and suggests ways in which a learning society can be developed, his writings may provide guidelines for us as we examine and work to improve educational opportunities for students.

Dewey (1967) states "The criterion of the value of school education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact" (p. 53). This single criterion for examining schools is a powerful one. Is what we do in schools conducive to such growth? Do we supply the means for such growth? Much of what we read and see in the schools would suggest that schools frequently are places where such growth is inhibited and the meaning given to learning is limited to mastery of selected pre-defined skills which have only remote value for the student.

Jackson (1968) in Life in Classrooms quite accurately and succinctly describes "The Daily Grind" of the classroom. The physical arrangement of the classroom, the daily schedule, and the classroom activities seem to follow a standard theme with a few variations. As he notes the experience of students in elementary classrooms involves a "ritualistic and cyclic quality of activities" (p. 8). The daily schedule which defines reading time as 8:30-10:00 daily, the typical seat-work, group discussion and question and answer activities and well defined rules for performing such activities noted by Jackson are still prevalent in schools today. The middle and high school student faces a similar experience. A certain body of material and particular procedures are used irrespective of the student's interests, needs and skills. Such routines and rituals lead to a very narrow view of learning and what being educated is about. As Dewey (1967) notes "...when it (any social arrangement) becomes cast in the mold and runs in a routine way..." it looses its educative power (pg. 6). Once cast in the mold of routine, much of what is presented to students is seen as remote and dead, having

little value and therefore routinely forgotten and not used once the test or project or paper or worksheet has been completed.

As Dewey notes the learning experience must be "an invitation to adventure," a vital and shared experience if it is to have meaning. The learner must be a participant in the experience not a mere spectator. As a participant in the experience the student has a vested interest in the outcome; as a spectator, the student is indifferent to the outcome. What we are seeing in our schools is a great deal of indifference. It is this indifference that leads to mediocrity.

The routization and ritualization of school reflects, in part our emphasis on acquisition of knowledge and the technical mastery of skills rather than understanding and the ability to apply information to new situations. Acquisition and technical mastery are easily observable and measureable and more easily taught. Learning, in this sense, requires memorization of an aggregate of facts and formulas and well practiced habits. Teaching is telling and providing opportunities for practice. The effect is clearly seen in the response of a second grader to the question do you read at home? She replied "I do reading at school; I read at home. This student has separated the intellectual training from the aim which is to enhance and give value to the reading experience. As Dewey (1967) comments," "skill attained apart from thinking is not connected with sense of purpose" (p. 152). When we isolate subject matter from its social context, it loses its vitality and value: Education becomes something done to us rather than something we do. More discipline, more homework, more practice, more standards, longer school days are things done to us. Active participation and involvement in the educational experience are things we do. The educational experiences provided must actively engage students in thinking, problem solving and coping. Our society and times demand it. A society which sees education and learning as a way to add to the quality of life, must go beyond what is recommended in the commission's report.

What is to be done? The first step is to create a societal environment that promotes the view that learning is more than an aggregation of facts and formulas and a particular test score; that "to function in a modern society individuals must not only construct, maintain, modify, or reify their social reality, but they must be able to deal effectively with increasing amounts of uncertainty as more options for individual and collective action become manifest" (Pellicano, 1983, pg. 68). Pellicano goes on to note that "Education in contemporary society, then, is not only concerned with literacy or skills per se, but with action and values" (pg. 68). Because our society seems enmeshed in the measureable and observable and the preparation of a marketable product this will be very difficult. It will require a deemphasis on tests and testing or at the very least testing that more carefully examines thinking and problem-solving skills. It will require that educational researchers examine more carefully understanding, values and attitudes acquired through schooling rather than the effectiveness of one method over another in terms of achievement. It will require school administrations to place more emphasis on the learning environments found in schools and less on the bureaucratic structures used to systematize them. It will require active and frequent interaction between educators and the communities they serve. The notion that schools are sacrosanct and not open to "invasion" from the community needs to be eliminated. It will require that the universities and colleges prepare teachers that are open-minded, knowledgeable and skillful in creating a participatory learning experience for students. It will require that the media be less inclined to report startling findings accompanied by sketchy if not inaccurate interpretations. Such an important endeavor will not occur overnight, but a first step must be taken if progress is to be made.

At the same time classroom teachers at all levels must move beyond " routine efficiency prized simply for its external tangible results" (Dewey, 1967, ps. 236). Dewey suggests, "The engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes

any activity more than mechanical" (p. 136). Engaging the student will require that teachers discontinue the division of subject matter into neat pockets of time, divorced from other subject matter and reality. For example, to treat spelling as a entity distinct from writing is an exercise rather than a learning experience. As a consequence the student sees no value for spelling other than scoring well on a test. While this may "motivate" the student, it does not actively involve the student. Spelling for the sake of spelling serves no purpose, has no value.

Skills are tools that enable the student to adventure into new realms, to initiate, to explore, to do, to create. They are not entities to be mastered for the sake of mastery. Taught as such they lack purpose. Dewey (1967) points out that "Exaggerated devotion to the formation of efficient skill irrespective of present purpose always shows itself in divising exercises, isolated from a purpose" (p. 198). The teaching of skills in appropriate contexts provides the student with a purpose for learning the skill, gives value to the skill learned. Learning spelling words selected from their own writing rather than from predefined lists is seen as useful. Seeing how geography impacts on how one lives has meaning and value; whereas learning isolated geographic terms has neither. Relating science to the successful planting of a garden, or a successful space shot or the eradication of a disease, or finding the solution to an environmental problem is real, is relevant, has purpose and requires an active response. An active response, as Dewey suggests puts things to use. What is learned are not isolated qualities - what is learned are connections. It is these connections that provide students with understanding and in turn become "instruments of further learning" (Dewey, 1967 pg. 274).

Obviously, such an approach has implications for the teacher. The needs and interests of the students will serve as guidelines for the development and implementation of curriculum. Content will serve as the context through which

skills are taught, rather than skills being taught irrespective of context and/or content being the simple mastery of factual knowledge. An active response will require "opportunities for investigation and experimentation, for trying out one's ideas upon things, discovering what can be done with materials and appliances. And this is incompatible with closely restricted physical activity" (Dewey, 1967, p. 302). Flexibility, spontaneity and purposive activity will be key descriptors of a classroom in which students explore and do and create and bring their skills to bear in defining and solving problems.

Such an approach demands that skills are acquired for without them problem-solving is impossible and understanding cannot be attained. Skill acquisition is important and is not denegrated by this approach. Dewey using language arts as an example notes that the use of language as an educational resource should not be decreased or eliminated but rather "that its use should be more vital and fruitful by having its normal connection with shared activities" (p. 38). In effect, this gives purpose and value to the skill as well as giving the student the vehicle for and interest in pursuing learning both in the formal context of the school and the informal context beyond the school. Hence, the creation of an environment that promotes learning and joy in learning: a learning society.

Essential to the development of classroom environments conducive to active, participatory learning experiences are well prepared professional educators. Unfortunately, teacher preparation institutions too frequently follow the technological, mechanical approach to learning found in the public school classroom and for many of the same reasons. The emphasis on pre-defined and measureable teacher competencies, accountability as measured by student achievement on standardized tests and the eroding confidence in teachers has led to, if not demanded, a "training" orientation toward teacher preparation rather than a problem-solving orientation.

Teaching is a problem solving activity. In the preactive phase the teacher must carefully consider the knowledge and skills to be taught, the attitudes and values that will be taught implicitly, the context in which these are to be taught and the needs, interests and skills of those being taught. The teacher must consider the variety of strategies, methods available and select those which will provide an environment conducive to learning, an environment that will enhance the students desire to continue learning. In short, the teacher must be able to clearly define the "problem" and therefore her goals, examine carefully how these goals can be met and select strategies and activities to meet them.

The effectiveness of the interactive phase, the implementation of the instructional program, will in large part rest on how carefully the teacher has reasoned the preactive phase. Given that, the daily encounters with students require that the teacher have the knowledge and skills to quickly define "problems" and select approaches for solving them. This is no small task considering elementary teachers may engage in as many as a 1000 interpersonal interchanges each day (Jackson, 1968, p. 11). Middle and high school teachers come in contact with 150-180 students daily of different ages and ability levels. Teachers "trained" to react in a given way to particular stimuli have nothing to fall back on, no tools with which to define or solve the "problem" at hand. This is manifested in the frequently made remark "they taught me to do this in college but it doesn't work" or teachers in preparation who remark this philosophical (meaning everything except specific methods) is junk, tell me how to do it. In both, the desire for the expedient, the directly effective takes precedence over long term effects, What we see is the separation of skills and knowledge from a context which as Dewey suggests diminishes the value and the purpose of the activity. Teaching becomes, then, a mechanical activity which does unto students rather than a process facilitating student participation, growth and skill development.

What does this mean to the institution preparing professional educators. Initially, it means the institution must make clear its desire to prepare professional educators rather than to "train" teachers. This requires a somewhat different "headset." The "quick-fix," the expedient will be subordinated to well reasoned, purposive action. This must be clear to the students entering the program as well as those school districts and cooperating teachers working with teachers in preparation.

Second, it means a carefully designed curriculum; one which balances subject-matter knowledge with professional education courses. The importance of subject matter knowledge cannot be underestimated. Using music, Dewey (1967) makes the point that: "The more the educator knows about music the more he can perceive the possibilities of the inchoate musical impulses of a child" (p. 182). Teacher preparation students without a sound grounding in subject matter cannot provide the kind of learning experiences that will facilitate the understanding of concepts that provide learners with the skill and desire to pursue the topic further. The oft heard lament of the teacher preparation students, "I'll never have to teach this in first grade or sixth grade or in high school" is countered if these students understand that teaching content, skills and processes effectively requires a broad and often in-depth knowledge of the topic; not simply what first graders need to know. The selection of appropriate activities and strategies requires understanding of the subject as well. The subject-matter courses selected will vary of course, but should be courses offered by mathematicians, biologists, historians etc. rather than courses such as history for teachers.

While it seems obvious that knowledge of content alone will not suffice, many states are currently drastically reducing the number of required education courses for certification. This seems, to me, to be a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Teachers are not simply teaching content, they are teaching it to somebody. To be effective requires an understanding of the nature and

characteristics of students, understanding of the nature of teaching and learning and knowledge of curriculum design and implementation, communication skills, evaluation and implications of various educational practices. Here again we see the importance of making connections. Without knowledge and skills in subject matter there is nothing to teach, with only knowledge of subject matter there is no reasoned way of teaching it. Dewey (1967) points out that "the problem of teaching is to keep the experience of the student moving in the direction of what the expert already knows. Hence the need that the teacher know both subject matter and the characteristics and capacities of the student" (p. 184).

Third, the teacher preparation student must become aware of the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, and how times, events, inventions, people and ideas interact to form the human experience. Through such understanding teacher preparation students are less likely to pigeon-hole curriculum into categories to be taught at specific times or to limit their history courses to specific recollection of events, places and people. This can be accomplished by developing interdisciplinary courses which focus on the ways social scientists examine problems or how the fine arts reflect the moods, the ideas and the concerns of the time.

Fourth, the teacher preparation students must become effective problem solvers. If they are to plan and implement an effective instructional program this is a necessity. If they are to develop these skills in their learners in order to enable them to explore and implement ideas, the teachers must have problem solving skills and be reasonably facile in using them. Professional education courses as well as content courses, should provide opportunities for the teacher in preparation to develop and use problem solving skills.

Fifth, the teacher preparation student must be actively involved in examining practice and putting theory and skills into practice. The isolation of theory from practice obscures and obstructs understanding of the teaching and learning

process. "Information severed from thoughtful action is dead" (Dewey, 1967, p. 153). Carefully designed and integrated field experiences are a must. It is only through classroom experiences that the more theoretical aspects of teaching acquire meaning, value and relevancy.

The key to effective field experiences is the careful selection of classroom teachers who serve as models for the teacher preparation students. The cooperating or supervising teacher who creates the type of environment that encourages learners to explore and to experiment, to do and to create; who provides the types of learning experiences that make learning a joy and a fruitful experience serves as such a model. Unfortunately, they are hard to find, if not rare. Hopefully the aim of teacher preparation programs should be to provide such models for future students.

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